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ABSTRACT

In teaching reading, teachers should understand the three categories of language information which all readers draw upon in the processing of information. These three categories are (1) grapho-phonic, the information from the writing system and from the phonological system of oral language; (2) syntactic information, the information from grammatical structures of the language; and (3) semantic information, information related to meaning and concepts represented by the printed word. An effective language experience program is one based on educational, psychological, and linguistic understandings. In the implementation of the program, teachers seek to help children relate the written language code to the spoken language code at the same time as they help children develop strategies for language recognition of the grapho-phonic, semantic, and syntactical information. Communication is foremost in this child-oriented program with reading instruction built on existing language performance, but the instruction does not stop with and is not limited to that performance, as language facility is constantly extended. (Author)

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AN EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

(LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH SESSION #3)

The language experience approach has been increasingly used throughout the country in the last decade, and the effectiveness of language experience instruction has varied. Teachers differ in their degree of enthusiasm for this way of working with reading and communication. Some teachers are convinced when they see the enthusiastic response of children, particularly those who were hard to reach with other methods but other teachers need assurance that language experience is more than a few new procedures for enrichment, that language experience is more than the latest "in" thing, and that language experience is more than a philosophy although it is a very sound philosophy. In providing that reassurance we should not convey that language experience is the answer to all reading ills. Teachers need to understand effective language experience instruction which has a strong theoretical rationale which offers insight into the reading process for both the teacher and the learner. That strong rationale must be interpreted for implementation so that language experience instruction can truly be effective.

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I'll consider the theoretical rationale - a rationale which is psychological, educational, and linguistic with special emphasis on the linguistic rationale. Then following the rationale, attention will be directed to classroom application of recommended teaching strategies.

The Theoretical Base of Effective Language Experience Programs

An effective educationally based program recognizes the uniqueness of the individual, starts where the learner is, and provides relevant experiences in an optimal learning atmosphere. Basic to an effective reading program is a knowledgeable teacher who understands that an effective language experience program is based on the major goals of reading of developing interest in reading, extending the reading vocabulary, and promoting competence in both word analysis and thoughtful interpretation. Those goals of reading do not change when the approach used to attain those goals may be different from the approaches used previously. However, the emphasis may shift with more stress in language experience programs on communication, on integration of all the language arts, and through concentration on larger language units than words or letters than is characteristic of some methods.

Psychologically, a child should feel better about himself as a result of his encounters with reading. Success, positive attitudes, personal motivation, involvement - all must be present in language experience learning. Much has been said by Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1), by R. V. Allen (8), and by Russell Stauffer (9) about the power of the language experience approach to reach children when communication is centered on their concerns. We want the human touch in teaching reading to be present in language experience classrooms. One first

grade teacher has said the language experience approach is the only human way to teach beginning reading. The individual is valued in the learning process with the focus not on materials, on techniques, on a prescribed program but on the child and his communication. Displays and collections of children's work add to the pride in authorship and communicate that the child and his ideas are valued.

A linguistically-based effective language experience program recognizes the linguistic nature of the reading process. In recent years, there has been growing interest in the implications of linguistic study for the teaching of reading. The term "linguistics" as related to reading instruction often signifies a beginning reading approach based on a phoneme-grapheme correspondence through the presentation of a carefully controlled vocabulary illustrating selected spelling patterns. However, linguistics is used here with a broader application. Since reading is communication through written language, all reading, therefore, is linguistic. Knowledge about language supplied by linguists should lead to reading instruction based on accurate information about language and about the reading process. The relationship of reading and spoken language is basic to a linguistic definition of reading and is basic also to teaching reading with the language experience approach.

The language experience teacher recognizes that the child is a user of the language (4). Upon school entrance that language use is oral but reading should be taught showing the relationship of the unfamiliar written code to the familiar oral code. In teaching reading, the three categories of language information which all readers draw upon in the processing of information should be understood. These three categories are (3):

1. Grapho-phonic. This is the information from the writing system and from the phonological system of oral language. Phonics is the name generally used when discussing the teaching of the code system of letter-sound relationships.

2. Syntactic Information. This is the information from grammatical structures of the language. The language user knows syntactical or sentence patterns and, therefore, is able to use this information orally before he learns to read his native language.

3. Semantic Information. This is information related to meaning and concepts represented by the printed words.

These language systems are interdependent and we shouldn't fractionate them in our teaching. Children use them in integrated ways as they read, selecting cues from all three categories. The ordering in the above list does not mean that one is taught first, then the second one, then finally the third one. No reading program is complete unless we teach children to deal with all three of these language categories. The most logical way to do this is to use natural language in the creation of beginning reading materials so that there is a match between the spoken and written code. Natural, not artificial, language is needed. The natural language of the reading material created by children in the language experience approach provides an excellent vehicle for demonstrating how language conveys meaning and how the written code represents the oral code.

Teaching Strategies in an Effective Language Experience Program

Effective teaching strategies in language experience reading rest upon having children develop language recognition skills. Language recognition skills encompass the abilities needed to deal with the three types of language information. Children should be introduced to language recognition in functional settings using examples selected from their

language with both direct and incidental instruction included. The aim of teaching language recognition is to equip children with tools for decoding for meaning in listening and reading and with the knowledge for encoding meaning in speech and writing. One of the questions I'm frequently asked about the language experience approach is "What about skills?" Unfortunately, to many the term 'skills' means phonics. While I'm not saying discard the teaching of letter-sound relationships, I am saying we need to look at other language recognition skills. We have long talked about phonics and vocabulary in reading with the frequent result that letter-sound and word units have been over-stressed while the syntactical patterns have been grossly neglected. The research on reading miscues has demonstrated that children do use sentence patterning information to a greater degree than teachers of reading usually acknowledge (3) Attention must be on language as the medium of communication - not on small portions of that language which are devoid of meaning without context.

We need to develop comprehension strategies in the reading of meaningful language. Developing comprehension does not come from isolated word and letter study - such study is usually a non-reading and a non-communication situation.

Let's look now at some concrete applications to reading situations. I'm suggesting some practices in addition to the well-known procedures of having children create and read their experience materials. Those activities are the heart of the language experience program and have been well described in the literature on the approach.

1. The first recommendation is that the teaching of language recognition skills should start with the development of the language terminology such a word, letter phrase, sentence, and sound which was identified by Downing (2) to be missing or confused in studies of five- and six-year-olds' concepts of language. The concepts can be demonstrated with kindergarten and first grade children with the first experience stories. As children match a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a letter to material on a chart story, the language concepts are shown in a natural and functional way. As children listen to words from a chart story which sound alike at the beginning, they are becoming oriented to the language of reading as well as practicing the needed skill of auditory discrimination.

2. Another teaching strategy is to use closure type activities for language experimentation in a functional context. For example, copies of experience stories with selected words left out can be given to children who are asked to supply the missing words. After children have filled in the words, they could be asked to think of other words which might fit. Questions such as "What else could belong?" "Can you put in a word that begins like _____?" "Could _____ be used here?" "Why or Why not?" extend language patterns. The stress here is on context using syntactical and semantic clues - those types of language information likely to be slighted in skill instruction. While the instruction can start with children's experience materials, the closure experimentation can be applied to other reading materials.

3. Another teaching strategy for language recognition can be developed with sentence experimentation and sentence expansion. For

example, children can be asked to find two words in the word banks which go together in some way. They may select things such as "green grass" or "red wagon" or "big rocket". The teacher may help them discover the pattern of a naming word and word which describes it. They could substitute another word for green or for grass or to find other two word patterns. The point here is to have children play around with language - not just to have reading vocabulary practice.

Another sentence expansion and experimentation idea is to use kernel sentences. The teacher can ask children to find words in word banks with patterns such as "rabbit hops" and "boy ran". The children can suggest words and phrases to extend the idea and discover how words such as "a" and "the" make the sentences sound more natural and how additional words give more information.

In game-type activities with language experimentation which starts with examples from their language, children can learn much about how the language operates. In reading we need more time for language exploration.

4. Another teaching strategy is to alert children to the interesting use of language as we seek to develop language awareness. To do this children's literature is a necessity. A teacher can call children's attention to unusual and original use of phrases and words. For example, first grade children are quick to pick out "flabbergasted" as the most interesting word in The Camel Who Took a Walk or to pick up refrains in books such as Horton Hatches the Egg or to identify the description of the lobster, "who moved about like a water-moving machine" from Swimmy.

Interesting language examples can be pointed out as they occur in the writing of children. These can be collected or charted and commented on favorably when creative stories are shared in a group. Growth in language awareness should be reflected in creative writing which improves as children have much to say and the tools for saying it.

5. Teaching strategies for constantly increasing the oral language background must be included in language experience programs. This recommendation may seem quite general and because of this may be overlooked when one talks of reading skills. This "input" responsibility of the teacher can be met in many ways - one major way is through literature although many other situations for oral language development will be used. The greater the oral language background, the better equipped the reader is for interpreting the written code.

6. A teaching strategy for oral reading can be to alert children to use the intonation to make the reading of their language experience stories sound like their speech. The language experience approach provides oral reading situations in which children can truly "Make it sound like someone talking." The teacher's model is important in illustrating fluent natural reading. In their concern that children learn vocabulary, some teachers may tend to distort the reading of experience stories with over-emphasis on separate words and an unnatural slow rate.

Lefevre (8) maintains that "single words, analyzed and spoken in isolation, assume the intonation contours of whole utterances. Single words thus lose the characteristic pitch and stress they normally carry in the larger constructions that comprise the flow of speech and bear meaning." He emphasizes that the sentence is the minimal unit of

meaning, and that children should develop "sentence sense" in reading. In the language experience way of learning to read the beginner does learn to supply the "melodies of speech" as he reads.

7. Strategies for showing the relationship of oral and written codes can be developed as punctuation signals are pointed out incidentally with the emphasis on function and meaning. For example, after a number of experience stories have been written the teacher may casually say, "This is the end of your idea - so we put a period. The next word goes with the next idea so we start this part with a capital letter."

8. A strategy for experimenting with vocabulary can be developed as children discuss and classify words in a variety of ways. For example, beginning readers may find color words, animal words, and words for people, etc. Older children can collect and classify interesting words, descriptive words, action words, etc. Words which describe characters in literature or which describe mood or feeling can form the basis for other discussions. Children can find words which have the same meaning or words with more than one meaning but without the drill this kind of vocabulary learning sometimes takes. Children can use sentences and experiment with sentence meaning as they replace various words in a sentence. The vocabulary study then is done not in isolation but in a meaningful context.

9. Another strategy is to have children classify words from their word banks by the phoneme-grapheme patterns. Discovery of similarities builds as children acquire an ever-increasing sight vocabulary. Instruction in letter-sound relationships will be one part of a balanced reading program but such instruction must be made as meaningful as possible.

10. Teaching strategies for structural analysis need to be employed in contextual situations. When children speak, they use the right s, ed, and ing forms if those forms are part of their speech. As children work with the word endings the changed function of the words can be demonstrated only in context. Closure choice activities are recommended here as children choose the appropriate forms. An experience story can be used to point out the words with endings added to the base words.

Summary

An effective language experience program is one which is based on educational, psychological, and linguistic understandings. In the implementation of the program teachers seek to help children relate the written language code to the spoken language code as they help children develop strategies for language recognition of the grapho-phonic, semantic, and syntatical information. Communication is foremost in this child-oriented program with reading instruction built on existing language performance but the instruction does not stop with or is not limited to that performance as language facility is constantly extended. Children speak language; children can learn to read language with effective language experience instruction.

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